

‘Gateways of Bereavement’: a defence of sub-categorisation in metal music

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As metal fans, I’m sure we are all very well aware and have been part of the heated arguments over the sub-categorisations of metal music which are commonly referred to as sub-genres. Metal, in my mind, is a large music culture that is comprised of multi-layered, intricately woven and usually interconnected individual cultures often lumped together. There is also a similar tendency in metal music studies, which is curious that in metal music studies, this question has not been really asked with a few notable exceptions which I will mention during this talk. As a result, I decided put together this talk for specifically a musicology conference as I think musicology needs have a bigger role in metal music studies alongside social sciences in order to cover the two big sides of the metal music world: the social and the music. Of course, I do not mean this to sound so discrete and separate as it does, and I will not talk about metal in the music analysis path of talking purely about music then reminding you that it was created by people. Before going into that however, I should say that I chose doom metal to frame this talk because doom metal is what I do and who I am, furthermore doom metal provides a good example of a sub-categorisation ground with its incredibly fragmented structure and these different fragments’ connections to other more recognisable categories in metal music. So before I begin just a forewarning: I don’t think I will be able to achieve a real defence per se here with this talk and I am more interested in asking some questions and the discussion of these questions rather than a solution to this problem.

I’m sure you noticed I used the term ‘music world’ to define metal. As defined by the sociologist Nick Crossley, ‘music world’ concept denotes a social space centred upon a self-identified musical style; a space set aside from other concerns, at least to some extent, where music is a primary focus and where participants share a set of musical preferences and knowledge. Music is a thread within the fabric of social life and it is a product of human interaction and collective action. More so, music worlds, in Crossley’s theory, are organised on a do-it-yourself basis, with participants forging their own means of recording, distributing, staging gigs, etc., and after doing so in self-conscious defiance of an industry whose values, both aesthetic and commercial, they reject. I will be looking at doom metal through this theory but this brings me to my first problem. The idea of a music world challenges the hierarchy music making; bringing, in Becker’s terms, the support personnel and fan base to the forefront

of music making. However what music worlds do not do is, even though it is defined as a space centred upon a self-identified musical style where music is a primary focus, it does not address this self-identified style or what the musical preferences of these participants are.

On the musicology side, I will focus on Fabian Holt's work on genre in popular music. Holt in his seminal book *Genre in Popular Music* sums up six assumptions on the categorisation of a genre:

1. Core-boundary models of genre should be complemented with decentred models.
2. Music has cross-generic and processual qualities that defy categorical fixity.
3. Spaces between genres are as valid sites of inquiry as are genres themselves.
4. In-between spaces have special significance for understanding diversity and transformation.
5. The metaphor 'in between' draws attention to how music is situated.
6. My in-between poetics seeks to unfold connections across border ad infinitum.

I think this approach shows another fruitful way of categorising metal music. And in the illustration of his model, Holt delves into the musical style of the genre he is exploring in a concrete way. There are two possible problems in this approach. As shown by Holt himself, in the realisation of this model of genre construction, he incorporates an ethnographic method. However, Holt only focuses on musicians, which leaves out the support personnel and audience. This, in turn, falls short of musicking, a concept of Christopher Small. Music world addresses musicking more sufficiently. Just as a quick recap, as Small defines it:

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are all contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance.

Musical cultures are performances regardless of the connection to a specific and limiting event type. So a genre theory should be able to address these different roles within it. Another critique of Holt's approach comes from amongst our own. Lewis Kennedy in his exploration of the symbiotic relationship between metal and hardcore in 21st century, states that a conception of genre is more than the simple categories into which bands places by commentators or banners under which bands position themselves. Kennedy here points to the same problem. This brings me to how we categorise metal music in metal music studies. Last

year, in her keynote speech in Modern Heavy Metal conference in Helsinki, Deena Weinstein said:

From horror and mayhem, ancient and current gods and fallen angels, to hymns to battles won and lost, philosophical discourses on nihilism, and so much more, metal fans can satisfy their sonic and intellectual interests without straying into omnivore territory. And it's all called metal!

But should we call it just metal? Weinstein further added that an increasingly large number of metal fans do not fully share the culture and in the past metal maintained mutual identification among the members of its fan base. Weinstein talks about this implied negative turn in metal music culture in the post-globalisation era which she calls the third era of metal. And calls the fans who do not immerse themselves in ALL of metal omnivores, just consumers of popular culture who do not belong. But in contrast to Kahn-Harris' argument in the book *Extreme Metal* stating all forms of extreme metal share fans, musicians, and institutions, didn't this alienation of different fragments within metal music actually started with the extreme turn in the 90s; an era Weinstein calls the second wave of metal? So one may easily argue that different sub-categories of metal became estranged well before the third wave of Weinstein. From an autoethnographical point of view, I became interested in a specific style of doom, what I will call death/doom, in the 90s, yet I was never interested in what is commonly referred to as slam death metal and many many other styles of metal. But I still feel like I belong to the metal culture.

Andy Brown, in his discussion of AgSIT (avant-garde, scene based, industry based and traditionalist) model of life cycles of a music scene, also rightly suggests that rather than seeking to generalise [a] model of restricted, symbolic capital accumulation from [one scene within metal] to metal as a whole, each phase of scene development and industry compromise should be examined in their specificity.

The extreme turn of the 90s also gave opportunity for a lot of older styles in metal music like death metal, doom metal and black metal to interact with each other resulting in significantly separate music worlds. I turn to Kennedy's work here again. While he discusses the relationship between hardcore and metal here in the 21st century, I think this also provides a good analogy to what happened in metal in the 90s. Kennedy says:

Crossover signalled a shift away from traditional, 'pure'. [...] Both genres have found sustenance, support, and inspiration in one another. As with any form of symbiosis, it is difficult, if not impossible, to disconnect one organism from the other.

Following Kennedy's thought, once this form of symbiosis became impossible to disconnect yet still got rejected from their main bodies, they became these separate entities, independent from what they came but still keeping their fused genealogical imprint.

This brings me to the freak show that is doom metal music. Before showing the rejection of one of these symbiotic entities, let's have a look at a few of these fragments under the doom umbrella musically.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, here are a few styles connected to doom. I will focus on three of these: traditional doom, funeral doom, death doom and drone doom. Firstly, let's listen to brief, very brief examples from these styles. First we have traditional doom:

Candlemass – Solitude 1986 Epicus Doomicus Metallicus

Next, there is death doom:

My Dying Bride – The Forever People 1992 As the Flower Withers

Third, drone doom:

Sunn O))) – NN O))) 2000 OO Void

And finally, funeral doom:

Shape of Despair – Quiet These Paintings Are 2001 Angels of Distress

Just from these very short excerpts, you can hear how different sounds are. But let's look at a few more things from these: these data are extracted from Encyclopaedia Metallum.

Traditional doom:

Candlemass: lyrical themes: Dark Fantasy, Religion, Doom, Life, Death, Hell

Approximate average song duration: approx. 5 minutes and 30 seconds

Solstice: lyrical themes: Pain, Sorrow

Approximate average song duration: 6 minutes and 30 seconds

Trouble: lyrical themes: Christianity, Death, Misery, Psychedelia

Approximate average song duration: 4 minutes and 40 seconds

Solitude Aeternus: lyrics themes: Abstract themes

Approximate average song duration: 5 minutes 40 seconds

Death doom:

My Dying Bride: lyrical themes: Despair, Pain, Romance, Losing Faith

Approx. average song duration: 7 minutes 40 seconds

Mourning Beloveth: lyrical themes: Anguish, Despair, Despondency, Doom

Approx. average song duration: 12 minutes

Saturnus: lyrical themes: Sorrow, Loss, Death

Approx. average song duration: 7 minutes 40 seconds

Novembers Doom: lyrical themes: Dark Emotions, Doom, Symbolism

Approx. average song duration: 5 minutes 50 seconds

Drone doom:

Sunn O))) lyrical themes: Darkness, Nothingness, Occultism

Approx: 13 minutes 30 seconds

Khanate: lyrical themes: Misery, Insanity, Hatred

Approx: 14 minutes 40 seconds

Earth: lyrical themes: Mostly Instrumental, Sci-Fi

Approx: 8 minutes 30 seconds

Nadja: lyrical themes: Love, Death

Approx: 16 minutes 30 seconds

Funeral doom:

Shape of Despair: lyrical: Misery, Pain, Loneliness

Approx: 10 minutes 20 seconds

Evoken: lyrical: Death, Suffering, Dissolution, Hatred, Negativity, Nihilism, Fear

Approx: 9 minutes 20 seconds

Skepticism: lyrical: Nature, Sorrow, Death

Approx: 9 minutes 10 seconds

Thergothon: lyrical: Nature, Cosmos, Spirituality, H.P. Lovecraft

Approx: 6 minutes 50 seconds

As you can see from these numbers the durations seem to line up with the fragment but themes are usually common along the board.

So why call these doom at all then? Why not call each one a different thing? This is because even though the sounds are quite different and the durations are significantly different, Common themes can be observed and the idea of slowness is common among all them. We can say that these have familial resemblance in Wittgenstein terms.

If we can call them all doom, why call them something doom? This is where the culture and people come in and where the musically symbiotic styles start rejecting each other. I will focus on death/doom here.

‘We used to have these “death metal” sections.’ Aaron Stainthorpe (2015)

Aaron Stainthorpe from My Dying Bride said that in their early repertoire, they used to have death metal sections. This shows that this was only an excursion to a different style rather than an integral part of the music.

[referring to death/doom listeners and music] ‘whiny goths’, ‘ghey [sic]’, ‘romantic bullshit’

‘[As a response to a complaint about doom/death’s place in the forum] This is like if a hippie complains about being discriminated in a neo-nazi forum.’ Doom-metal.com forums 2006-7

These quotes you see are from a doom metal forum. Especially this sentence shows how estranged doom metal culture in general is from death/doom.

Musicians also feel the same way.

‘Doom metal is not some band with a violin [referring to My Dying Bride, a pioneer of death/doom style].’ A ‘true’ doom (C.O.T.D) musician in interview, 2005

And one of my participants talks about their favourite doom bands:

‘Talking about doom in strict sense my favourite bands are Black Sabbath, Trouble, Saint Vitus and Cathedral, whereas in a wider sense My Dying Bride, old Anathema, Skepticism, Dolorian, Evoken, Shape of Despair and Woebegone Obscured.’

Atkinson (2016)

There is doom bands first such as Trouble, St. Vitus, Black Sabbath, then there is doom but not really doom bands like My Dying Bride, Skepticism, Shape of Despair.

Culturally, these small fragments are not welcome in larger structures from which they are born. So sub-categorisation is not an artificial construct but an organic one. But this sub-categorisation of metal music is beneficial in another way. It helps to identify issues and to argue more accurately. For example, let's take these two quotes from again Kahn-Harris:

'Extreme metal frequently teeters on the edge of formless noise.'

'Anything political is seen to sully the purity of music.'

The first point especially in death/doom style does not hold as death/doom usually has a clear structure and funeral doom can hardly be considered to be noise. Yet these styles are styles emerged after the extreme turn and they should be considered under extreme metal umbrella. For the second point, this may hold up in death metal culture, but in drone doom and death/doom, political ideas are welcomed, and in the case of drone doom, as Owen Coggins argues even activism becomes an important part of the culture.

This is just a small example, but I think it shows how sub-categories can help to engage with specific issues within smaller cultures and this also helps to avoid the pitfalls of generalisations. In conclusion, I tried to show how different methods of categorisation and sub-categorisation can be beneficial in metal music research.